ON THE SYNTAX AND THE PRAGMATICS OF 'OPTIONAL' *THAT*

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This paper deals with the phenomenon of that-deletion, a process by which the complementizer may be optionally dropped in embedded complement clauses in English. Treating it as an optional phenomenon, though, is problematic for linguistic models like the Minimalist Program, which rely heavily on notions of economy and optimality. We wish to provide further support to the claim that that-deletion is not optional and that its occurrence is favoured by pragmatic factors. Ultimately, we believe that a better insight into the pragmatics of that-deletion can help us account for it syntactically.

Keywords: optionality, Minimalism, syntax, complementizer deletion, register variation

1. Introduction

Optionality phenomena are at the core of the Minimalist Program (MP hereafter), for they seem to pose a problem to the assumption that linguistic derivations are the maximally simple syntactic computations that satisfy the requirements of PF and LF. However, we know that optionality is attested crosslinguistically: *wh*-movement is optional in French root clauses (Matthieu 2004) or in Singapore English (Yeo 2010), scrambling is optional in free word order languages like German. The flexible order of the internal arguments of ditransitive verbs is another example of optionality –see Anagnostopoulou (2003) for an overview on these predicates. Our intention is not to question the main tenet of the MP regarding the optimality of derivations, on the contrary. The data we have gathered in Llinàs-Grau and Fernández-Sánchez (in preparation) seem to suggest that optionality is not real in the case of *that*-deletion. True optionality does not seem to arise in the other cases we have just mentioned either – ditransitive constructions of the type THEME-GOAL, for example, have different semantics from GOAL-THEME (see Harley 2002).

A related debate is found in L1 acquisition research. Child language is partly characterized by the lack of elements that are essential in the utterances of adult speech. Two elements that are frequently missing in child language are sentential subjects and the inflection of verbal forms. These two phenomena are interesting for our study as they have both been analysed as the result of a certain type of optionality in the grammars of children. This optionality, though, has been questioned by Hyams (2001), who finds certain determining factors in the child choice, and much higher percentatges in one of the two options, thus invalidating real free variation in L1 and giving support to the idea that optionality should not arise in natural language.

In this paper, we want to focus on the phenomenon of *that*-deletion in English, by which the complementizer is allowed to be dropped in embedded complement clauses:

(1)   a. Mary thinks that Peter is attractive.
        b. Mary thinks 0 Peter is attractive.

In Llinàs-Grau & Fernández-Sánchez (2011), a current state of affairs regarding that-deletion is presented. Following the premise that all optionality processes should be somehow motivated, it is argued that formal contexts favour the retention of the complementizer *that*, as it is shown by (i) statistically overwhelming amount of *that*-omission in adult UK English in the CHILDES database, and (ii) salient retention of *that* in formal contexts –a considerable amount of letters to the editor in the British newspaper *The Economist* were analysed and elicitation tests to native speakers of English were made.

The phenomenon has been given different syntactic approaches (see Llinàs-Grau 2009, and references therein) but here we will follow Rizzi and Shlonsky (2007) in claiming that the phenomenon is the result of an internal truncation process, independently motivated for L1 data (Rizzi 1993 among others). Moreover we follow Sorace (2005) for our analysis of *that*-retention in the near-native L2 data, which provides support to our analysis of the phenomenon and to the idea that optionality is apparent, but not real.

2. The syntax of *that*-deletion

Of the different accounts that analyze the phenomenon of *that*-deletion, we will follow Rizzi and Shlonsky (2007, R&S henceforth), an analysis which claims that an embedded clause lacking a *that* as in (1) is an instance of a truncated structure, lacking levels in the left periphery.[1]

R&S's aim is to account for the fact that subject extraction is less extended than object extraction. To achieve this aim, the authors make use of two notions which are crucial in the left-periphery framework (Rizzi 1997, among others): Criterial Freezing and the Subject Criterion. The Subject Criterion restates the EPP as a criterial requirement on subjects. Criterial Freezing implies that elements which move to dedicated positions cannot move further. The essence of their account is that subjects must move to a criterial subject position, (Spec, SubjP), and are frozen in place. Nevertheless, languages have developed strategies to skip this position and it is precisely because these strategies exist that subject extraction is possible. The "English strategy" is C-deletion. *That*-deletion in embedded declarative clauses is analyzed in parallel to the analysis of raising structures, where subject extraction is fundamental. In a typical raising structure such as (2), the subject moves from the embedded clause but no freezing effect arises:

Susan seems to be delighted with her pregnancy.

The fact that this is possible is explained by reference to the mechanism of truncation, which allows for certain layers of the structure to be absent. An embedded clause containing a *that* complementizer involves a derivation where *that* moves from Fin to Force, as *that* expresses both finiteness and declarative force. A truncated structure with no *that* lacks the FinP, the ForceP and the SubjP. The absence of these

layers implies that the subject does not move to (Spec, SubjP) and thus, Criterial Freezing does not apply.

There is empirical evidence for truncation in cases of English *that*-deletion, the following examples show that when focus and topic are activated deletion is impossible, i.e. Force and Fin cannot be truncated if Top and/or Foc are activated:

(2)   a. She thought *(that) this book, you should read.

      b. She thought *(that) never in her life would she accept this solution.

<div align="right">(cited in R&S, adapted from Grimshaw 1997)</div>

Another essential piece of evidence in support of this analysis of *that*-deletion is ECM, where the CP system is "radically absent" and the clause is interpreted as declarative, the default choice.

3. Pragmatics-driven variation

3.1. Sorace (2005)

That-deletion is a construction allowed by the syntax of English, as explained in the previous section. The grammar has mechanisms that make it a possible alternative construction to the one containing an overt *that*. When we observe the use of this construction, we find that there are contexts which seem to favour absence of *that*, as the following examples illustrate in two contrasting contexts. The examples in (4) are sentences in a newspaper article, the examples in (5) come from a song:

    a. Yet anyone would believe from some of the coverage that an impurity has been discovered in an otherwise pure world.

      b. The Sunday Times alleged that Michael Foot was linked with the KGB.

<div align="right">*The Independent* (17 April 2009)</div>

(3)   a. We never knew we could want more than that out of life.

      b. Everyone said they were crazy.

<div align="right">"Scenes from an Italian Restaurant" (Billy Joel)</div>

(4) and (5) are two extreme contexts containing two factors that together maximize the use of *that* –(4)– or its absence –(5): written versus oral, and formal versus informal. Thus, what we claim is that there are extrasyntactic factors that determine the choice of deleting the complementizer, in other words, pragmatics favours deletion, and syntax allows it.

To support this view, we apply Sorace (2005)'s ideas of gradient learnability, by which it is claimed that certain linguistic properties, precisely those that "involve the complex interplay of syntactic and discourse conditions" (Sorace 2005: 65) are harder – or utterly unlikely– for very advanced (near-native) learners of a given L2 to acquire because of L1 interference. These are called "soft constraints" and have to do with "the mapping between syntax and lexical-semantics, pragmatics and information structure" (Sorace 2005: 55). Conversely, "hard constraints" are related to structural properties of language –i.e. they are purely syntactic features that L2 learners have to deal with– but in very advanced speakers, the production of these constraints is similar, if not identical, to native speakers' production.

The production mismatch between native and near-native speakers with respect to soft constraints shows up as residual optionality. For example, in Italian, as Spanish or Catalan, null subjects are possible when they refer to a topic, and the overt realization of subjects may be left to introduce a new referential entity or to contrast an already existing referent. Basically, this explanation implies two things: first, that there is a syntactic licensing for subjects to be null –allowed by the null-subject parameter; and secondly, that this parameter is activated when discourse-pragmatic conditions apply. English near-native speakers of Italian show residual optionality regarding subject overt realization– hence producing (6b)– in cases where Italian native speakers would clearly disfavour it (as in (6c)):

(4)   a. Perchè Maria non ha   parlato con nessuno? ((1) in Sorace 2005: 59)

        why   Maria not has talked to   anyone?

    b. Perchè   lei è troppo timida.

      because   she is too   shy.

    c. Perchè ø è troppo timida.

We do not intend to assess the reason why there is late (or non-) acquisition of these features. Sorace attributes it to a difficulty in integrating different types of knowledge, and the debate between whether this is due to representational or processing problems is left unexplained. Notwithstanding, in the next section we intend to provide evidence for the assumption that *that*-deletion is favoured by a specific pragmatic context (informal and oral).

3.2. Testing Sorace (2005)

In order to shed light into the nature of *that*-deletion, we designed an experiment and tested Sorace's proposal. We tested near native speakers of English whose L1 is either Catalan and/or Spanish, two languages which crucially do not contrast in the fact that they do not allow *that*-deletion. Their complementizers cannot be omitted as exemplified by the translations of (1) above, repeated here as (7) and (8). The contrast with English is clear:

(5)   a. La Maria pensa que en Pere és atractiu.   (Catalan)

    b. *La Maria pensa en Pere és atractiu.

(6)   a. María piensa que Pedro és atractivo.   (Spanish)

    b. *María piensa Pedro es atractivo.

We did two experiments: in one, we tested Spanish and Catalan near-native speakers of English to elicit the use of complementizer *that* in informal contexts. In the first one, we presented six participants with four different informal situations like the one in (9) to which they were prompted to give an opinion orally starting with "I think". Out of the 24 tokens we obtained, 18 showed *that*-retention, as shown in Figure 1.

(7)   A very good friend of yours has asked you to go shopping with her, as she wants to buy some clothes and admires your taste for fashion. She's just tried a T-shirt on which doesn't suit her at all. Let her know.

The second experiment was exactly the same as the previous one yet differed with respect to the participants' L1, as these were all native speakers of English. Results for this second experiment are plotted in Figure 2.
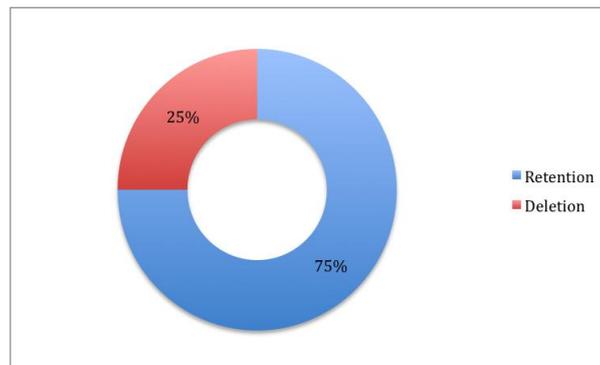

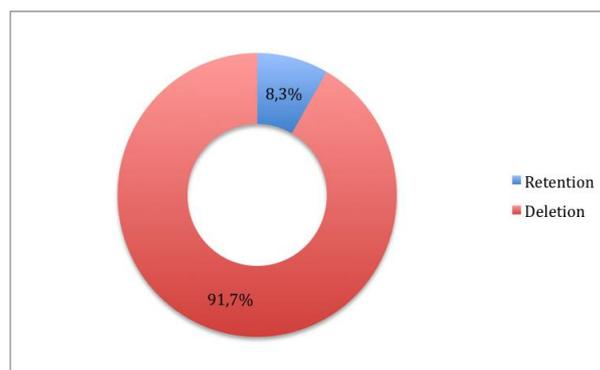Figure 1: *That* production in informal contexts by L2 speakers

Figure 2: *That* production in informal contexts by L1 speakers

4. Discussion

If we analyse our results along Sorace's lines, we could claim that the retention of *that* is a soft constraint, in the sense that it is pragmatically-driven. Because these types of constraints are harder to learn, near-native speakers fail to match English native speakers' production. As figure 1 shows, near natives of Spanish and Catalan as L1 produced *that*-retention in 75% of cases, which clearly contrasts with figure 2, where *that*-retention was quite marginal.

In relation to this, the analysis of register in Haegeman (1987) also sheds light into the phenomenon of *that*-deletion. Her analysis of register as language-internal variation offers a way of conceptualizing *that*-deletion as a specific kind of language internal variation. The constructions considered by Haegeman (deletion of arguments) are instances of parametric options. A specific register is viewed as triggering a parametric option (that of topic-prominent discourse-oriented languages) different from that of Standard English. As long as *that*-deletion is not reworded as a parametric option the language internal variation of *that*-deletion choice cannot be restated in parametric terms but it can be regarded as a 'truncation triggering' register.

Gallego (2007) does relate the phenomenon of *that*-deletion to parameters following the phase framework. To do this, Gallego assumes the account of *that*-deletion in Pesetsky and Torrego (2001, P&T hereafter), which is based on assumptions that cannot be adapted to the view in R&S (2007), followed here. P&T propose a complete different way of conceiving Nominative Case (as an *u*T feature in D), and revise the orthodox conception of *that* as a complementizer, they view it as an instance of T to C movement. In their proposal, though, they do not grant a Spanish *que* the same status, they view it as a proper C. Contra P&T, for Gallego *que* in Spanish is also an instance of T to C movement. The lack of *que* deletion as an alternative to *que*-presence is the result of a specific (parametric) process of Phase Sliding which grants TP a phase status and thus makes the subject unavailable for valuing *u*T in C. This fact is essential to the P&T account, where optionality arises from the fact that either *that* or a DP subject can value a *u*T in C. This way of considering *that* (as a T element) is far from the view we adopt, where *that* is an instance of Fin to Force, two left-peripheral positions.

Unifying Spanish and English with respect to the deletion of the complementizer, however, does not come so straightforwardly. First, as we have claimed, formal registers favour *that*-retention in English, whereas in Romance languages like Spanish, Catalan or Italian it is precisely the other way round: formal, written contexts favour *that*-omission. Secondly, while *that*-deletion in Romance languages is only possible if the verb in the embedded clause is in subjunctive mood (10), it is precisely this condition that forbids *that* from being dropped in English (11):

(8)   Preguem esperin a ser atesos (Catalan)
(9)   Last week, he ordered that the mural be taken down and that Labor Department conference rooms named for labor leaders be renamed for mountains, counties or something else perceived as neutral.

<div align="right">(NYTimes, March 28th 2011)</div>

This contrast in complementizer deletion between Spanish, Catalan and English may be related to the different ways languages encode different registers. Pending future research on the issue, we believe R&S's model can be flexibly adapted to the pragmatics of English *that*-deletion, as truncation has been independently argued to be responsible for the omission of other elements in child language. The truncation proposal in child speech relies on the fact that the axiom by which a root clause is a CP in adult speech may be non operative in child language. What we claim is that a certain register may trigger the relaxation of this axiom for embedded clauses in adult speech.

Notes

1. R&S's approach is not uncontroversial. In Llinàs-Grau and Fernández (2011) we review some of its shortcomings, and argue that a PF-account of *that*-deletion may fare better empirically and conceptually. However, we have decided to avoid this debate given space limitations.

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